

# Market Economy and Mass Literacy

## Revisiting Innis's Economics of Communication

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*From the perspective of the conceptual framework developed by Harold A Innis, the pursuit of mass literacy in the context of the so-called 'globalisation' of the Indian economy calls for analysis at a number of levels. The advantages that a literate population offers to the growth of a market economy form a central theme of this paper. At a different level, the discussion covers the implications of becoming literate in terms of 'what is there to read'. In addition to this generalised question, the discussion also looks at the specific problems of survival and development that the illiterates and neoliterates face in the emerging political economy.*

A SUSTAINED official push for achievement of mass literacy has come at a time when the Indian economy is being speedily 'opened up' for penetration by the world capitalist system. This historical coincidence calls for analysis. The purpose of this paper is to examine this coincidence with a view to widening the customary scope of discussions on literacy. As a first step towards building the conceptual apparatus needed for this analysis, we need to distinguish the logical implications of mass literacy from its historical implications.

By 'logical' implications I mean the outcomes or benefits associated with literacy in a generalised sense. These benefits are commonly supposed to accrue privately to the individual who becomes literate. Typically, these benefits are portrayed as intellectual or cognitive capacities that literacy is said to generate and enhance. Once these capacities have been created, they are expected to act as a basis for certain changes in the behaviour and personality of the literate individual. Effects on the individual are linked, in the theory<sup>1</sup> of 'logical' effects of literacy, to the aggregate benefits that mass literacy brings to society as a whole, to its productive capacities and its politics and culture. It is believed that mass literacy can take society to a new stage of 'development'.

From a 'historical' perspective, the important question to ask in the context of mass literacy is: 'When did a society acquire mass literacy?' Such a question asks us to connect mass literacy with other characteristics of a society which were undergoing change at the time that mass literacy was achieved. The hidden assumption in this approach is nicely expressed by Galbraith at the start of his recent book: 'Life, in particular economic life, is in a constant process of change, and, in consequence, the same action or event occurring at different times can lead to very different results.'<sup>2</sup> From a historical perspective, the timing of the attempt to make a society widely literate is an im-

portant variable determining or influencing the effects that mass literacy might have in that society. Underlying this perception is the idea that mass literacy may not have the same effects in every society and at all times, that there is nothing universal about the manner in which mass literacy affects people's socio-economic and political behaviour. From a historical perspective it would appear that the 'logical' effects of mass literacy may not occur in a society if the economic and political changes occurring at the time of achievement of mass literacy are not conducive to these effects.

### II

In order to use the historical perspective in the context of India's attempts to achieve mass ('total') literacy by the coming turn of the century, I will depend to a great extent on the conceptual framework developed by Harold A Innis (1894-1952). Innis has been succinctly described by his only biographer to date as an explorer of the economic functions of culture.<sup>3</sup> Innis showed through his numerous studies in economic history, and later on in his studies of different civilisations, that the technology of communication affects cultural values which include and influence economic behaviour. Far from being a technological determinist, though he sounds like one if read piecemeal, Innis draws attention to the indeterminacy of the forces, especially values, shaping a course of events. His works show how the technology of communication, including transport, acts as a dominant factor interacting with other material and symbolic factors. At times it acts as a meta-variable, shaping the capacities of a social order or organisation for coping with the pattern of circumstances confronting it.

Central to Innis's perspective on economic growth and development is the assumption that satellite or marginal economies cannot be understood in the same manner as one understands the economy of the hub or the centre. This assumption arises

out of the importance Innis attached in his studies in economic history to a generalised concept of overhead costs in relation to the time horizons of capital. The recognition of 'space' and 'time' factors led him to the perception of 'bias' in the price system which, in mainstream economic theory, is assumed to be a highly flexible and value-neutral system. Innis saw that the theory of a neutral price system mystifies the role of values in shaping economic behaviour. Indeed, values can be described as being the continuous thread in Innis's works which otherwise cover many different terrains. Where do values arise? And how do they shape the economic and cultural organisation of society? These are the two questions that arise out of Innis's works as being of paramount importance.<sup>4</sup>

The framework that Innis developed for analysing the development of staple-based economies, resulting from colonial expansion and expropriation of new geographical territories, treat space and time as the two primary dimensions of exchange. 'Space' implies the geographical boundaries and the size of the population within which a market or exchange of commodities develops. The 'time' dimension implies the period that is expected to elapse in the process of exchange. The two dimensions form a structure in which the participants of a market system must function. The spatial aspect of the market covers the cost involved in moving goods from where they are produced to where they will be used up or consumed, as well as the speed at which capital, or rather the surplus capital, can be made available or, literally, communicated as being available. The temporal dimension, on the other hand, covers the problem of recovery of capital invested in an exchange process. More complex exchanges involve several applications of technique, and therefore take a longer time to be completed, thus 'deepening' the capital invested, as opposed to the 'widening' involved in the spatial expansion of capital. Innis argues that there is no escape from value judgments being

recognised as a key variable involved in the shaping of decisions made by participants of an exchange process. He insists that the value judgments (on questions such as 'what is sufficient and therefore what is surplus and investible, where, and for how long a period of gestation?\*) buried in the drama of economic exchange arise out of the complex interplay of space and time dimensions. In general, capital 'deepening' would be associated with industrialism, while capital 'widening' would be associated with commercialism. To this distinction between industrial capitalism and commercial capitalism Innis attaches considerable significance, obviously because of the value-components he sees in these modes of economic growth.

It is essentially this insistence on the value-components of different modes of economic organisation that found expression in Innis's later works which, unfortunately, continue to be read by many as being independent of his earlier economic works. His famous studies of the relationship between culture and communication are rooted in his understanding of *homo economicus* and his criticism of neoclassical economics. Innis's theory of communication cannot be seen as a self-contained system of ideas which is how Marshall McLuhan, popularly believed to be an authentic interpreter and exponent of Innis's ideas, chose to see it.<sup>5</sup> The fact is that Innis's theory of communication had an empirical basis which was constructed in a life-time of observation and analysis of the political nature of economic processes. The influence of Marx on Innis was obvious, although, as in the case of C Wright Mills and Kenneth Burke, it found expression in a recognisably interactionist style.<sup>6</sup> One can cite passages in Marx that would show us Marx's own strong interest in subtler factors that shape man's material life, and one can say that the study of political economy developed and institutionalised at Toronto by Innis looked more deeply and elaborately into these subtler factors than Marx had. The method, using historical and comparative analysis, focusing on contradictions and the dynamic—that is, change-inducing—aspects of economic and cultural history, was similar to that of Marx.<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside the style in which Innis wrote, a style representing someone laboriously chopping away at a vast block of information rather than someone sharing a thesis, the complimentary character of the insights that might accrue to us today from reading Marx and Innis cannot be missed. Especially interesting in our context is the attention Innis paid to the conflict manifested between the 'centre' or developed areas and the 'margins'. Such conflict runs parallel to, and at times in conjunction with, conflict between socio-economic classes that Marx had emphasised.

Another influence on Innis is said to be that of Veblen, especially that of Veblen's contrast between business and industry as two categories carrying distinct cultural baggage.<sup>8</sup> Veblen's theory of economic cycles, which make waste and war inevitable aspects of the capitalist system, also finds reflection in Innis's writings.

'I have been concerned with the possible extension of concepts in the special field of economics and in particular the concept of monopoly notably in knowledge.'<sup>9</sup> This is how Innis described his own work in a paper written in the last year of his life. The statement captures the complex agenda of his voluminous and varied works. Commentators have used many different entry points into the edifice of Innis's ideas, and it would be correct to say that some of the entry points have proved very confusing and misleading, such as the ones used by McLuhan and other media-analysts.<sup>10</sup> To my mind, the best entry point is the concept of fixed capital which Innis apparently extended to the point of making it a quasi-philosophical category for the study of social organisations, indeed of the human condition itself. The extended concept surfaced early in Innis's career. In an oft-quoted passage in his first major study, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, Innis indicated in a laconic manner how a heavy fixed capital can be a means of self-destruction:

The significance of the habitat of the beaver in the development of the fur trade may be suggested. Since the beaver was an amphibious animal, its fur was thick and abundant and it could be hunted in summer, although the fur was then much less valuable. The length of time required for it to arrive at maturity was an important factor in the destruction of the supply of fur and its non-migratory tendencies and elaborate housing facilities made destruction certain. In the language of the economist, the heavy fixed capital of the beaver became a serious handicap with the improved technique of Indian hunting methods, incidental to the borrowing of iron from Europeans. Depreciation through obsolescence of the beaver's defence equipment was so rapid as to involve the immediate and complete destruction of the animal.<sup>11</sup>

This tongue-in-cheek passage illustrates the scope Innis saw in the concept of fixed capital and related concepts. We found in it a metaphor for the inert part of a system of organisation—the part which invites rigidity and inadaptability on the rest of the system concerned. The ultimate danger that a heavy fixed capital invites upon a system is that of the formation of a monopoly. In Innis's framework, formation of monopoly is the beginning of death even though the high point of the formation appears to be full of glitter and joy, and certainly full control. Like Minerva's owl, the system seems to be starting on an

impressive flight even as the dusk is gathering: Innis used this Hegelian metaphor as the starting sentence of his most celebrated work, *The Bias of Communication*, which was first published in 1951, the year before Innis died.

The interesting thing about the concept of fixed capital as a metaphor is that it permits both empirical study and symbolic application. In the empirical sense, it draws attention to the costs involved in the establishment and maintenance of any organisation or system, most significantly for Innis the dominant system of communication in a society or culture. In a fully functioning market system, some or even all the costs involved in the installation and maintenance of a system of communication may be rendered invisible; in any case, conventional practice of economics usually ignores or misses the importance of such costs. First are costs that in modern market economies are usually transferred to the state. Such costs are perceived as being unlikely to generate profit or else they are labelled as social activities from which it would be somewhat unethical to profit. Market discourses customarily mystify such costs; yet, once incurred, these costs radically enhance the potential for profit-seeking. Relevant examples would be the costs incurred in running of railways and the development of a television network. In a second category we can place the costs that help a market system to manage demand by exercises of need-arousal, need-shaping and attitude-building. The costs incurred in advertising are the prime example of this type. In Innis's analysis, costs incurred in transmission and printing of news for large-scale circulation are also of this type, since 'in a consumer goods economy news is an important device for the sale of advertising'.<sup>12</sup> The costs involved in running of an education system and literacy programmes are also of this type, though in certain situations some of these costs are transferred to the share of the state.

The social ecology resulting from the major enterprises of different kinds illustrated above can be characterised as the symbolic part of the fixed capital locked in them. By social ecology I mean the value-system, common attitudes, and the procedures entrenched in a system. As the given context of all decisions to be made, the ecology can be viewed as representing the overhead cost of the decisions permitted by it. For instance, dependency on literate communication and procedures involves important overheads which are both physical (such as paper) and symbolic (such as the long and complex procedures of legal institutions). Returning to Innis's own usage, he saw the function of fixed capital and the overheads peculiar to a fixed capital in terms of the creation of a bias in the system, the nature of

the bias being shaped by the nature of the fixed capital.

Innis made a broad, two-fold classification of the biases that fixed capital, in its broad sense, of a society introduces. One is the bias of time or organisation of temporal continuity, and the other is the bias of space or exercise of control over different, far-flung regions.<sup>13</sup> The two biases have contrasting implications for politics and culture, and certainly the economy. A time-biased political order is characterised by loose, decentralised, but hierarchical structure of decision-making. On the other hand, space-biased social orders present the prospect of a rigid, centralised structure, featuring egalitarian behaviour and norms. Technique, according to Innis, is the crucial aspect of the fixed capital entrenched in a culture or civilisation shaping its bias. Just as in the purely economic context, the development of technique, for example in transport, would determine the relative emphasis on capital-deepening versus capital-widening and the value-components of the two kinds of emphases, similarly in the subtler contexts of modes of communication, the techniques on which a society depends for acquisition, storage and dissemination of information would shape its bias in favour of time or space. And either bias would carry a baggage of values. Indeed, civilisation or culture is nothing but a certain pattern of values, the patterning being the result of the particular bias inherent in the mode of communication in which a culture lets its fixed capital, overheads, and unused capacities accumulate.

The distinction between oral and written means of organising information and social relationships acquires deep complexity in Innis's analysis, which is very different from the analyses that have been offered by writers such as Havelock and Ong.<sup>14</sup> Innis permits no simple contrast between the oral and the written even though he acknowledges that oral communication is coterminous with the time bias while literate communication assists spatial organisation. Innis would like us to go deeper—towards locating the media in which either oral or written communication takes place and towards the techniques used by these media. The same medium can have different historical effects, depending, among other things, on the technique used in that medium. Writing on clay tablets or parchment promoted continuity or the time bias, whereas in the context of printing, especially the printing of newspapers, writing promotes space-bias and present-mindedness. Another special point to note is that Innis did not propose harmonious development of the two biases as a solution to the problem of survival, but rather the possibility of countervailing forces being permitted to offset either bias and to contain the tendency towards the formation

of monopoly of knowledge that is suited to a medium.

The opposite of a state of balance between countervailing forces, in the Innisian scheme, is monopoly. Expanding the scope of the usual meaning of the term in economics, Innis applied it to signify the dominance of a medium of communication in a social system. Neill's interpretation and summary of Innis's usage may be of help here: "In such a case (i.e., where one medium of communication acquires an overwhelmingly dominant role) the firms and industries may be perfectly competitive but the medium itself as the dominant channel of intercourse monopolises information and, in consequence, the general climate of opinion, with the effect that one civilisation (organisation of values) and its vested interests are entrenched."<sup>15</sup> The kind of analysis Innis presents of the history of civilisations is crucially dependent on identification of the vested interests associated with a certain medium of communication and the institutionalisation that results from its dominance. Interests vested in a medium thus provide us with a basis to predict the future of a social order. The institutions embodying the vested interests also provide organised expressions of the value-system inherent in the medium of communication. Economic and cultural values thus become 'readable' for prediction and sometimes for corrective action.

Innis's conceptual framework presents the modern democratic state as primarily a space-biased institution. The fact that liberal democracy and the modern state are part of the industrial revolution as it unfolded in the specific circumstances of Europe ought to persuade us to see it as a key institution maintained to overcome the contradictions of capitalism, especially the price-system. The character and capacities of the modern state grew in response to the difficulties that surfaced in the process of capital deepening. These difficulties were all part of the enormous uncertainties involved in the heavy investments made by entrepreneurs against the prospects of long-deferred recoveries. Reverses and losses resulting from rapid advancement of technique required institutional mechanisms which would ensure maintenance of the status *quo*, often by use of force, let alone by legitimising symbolic actions for maintenance of peace in the face of open expropriation in peripheral areas known as colonies.

Innis recognised the tragic dilemma in which the modern state is chronically caught: the dilemma of being overtly committed to overcoming the rigidities of the price system by institutionalised means while becoming increasingly equipped, as a result of improvement in technology, to use force as a means to prevent impending losses and the collapse of the price system. As he ex-

plained, "monetary nationalism is a reflection of the role of the state in the expansion of industrialism and the means by which the state is compelled to rely increasingly on expanded public debt and to avoid increasingly its effects. ...To obtain bread we must build a gun or lay down a stone"<sup>16</sup>

The American state was, to Innis, a particularly grim case of the dilemma facing the institution of the modern state. It was caught in the ceaseless contradictions arising out of fluctuating public opinion, patterned by the newspaper industry (television had not yet arrived), and the military implications of its highly nationalistic constitution. Apparently, Innis saw the problem arising out of the empowerment of America as a threat to the western civilisation and the world as a whole. One wishes it were possible to see his reading of this threat as an emotional reaction of a paranoic Canadian. America was to Innis the most striking mutation of the space-bias inherent in the post-reformation western world.<sup>17</sup> In its American manifestation, it was incapable of solving the problems of survival and continuity except in ways that would further accentuate the problems posed by space-bias. In a gently satirical remark on America's self-preoccupation, Innis wrote in the concluding lines of his paper entitled 'Military Implications of the American Constitution': "Ostrogorski has quoted the remark that God looks after little children, drunken men, and the US. I hope it will not be thought blasphemous if I express the wish that He take an occasional glance in the direction of the rest of us."<sup>18</sup>

### III

From the perspective of Innisian political economy, the pursuit of mass literacy in the context of the so-called 'globalisation' of the Indian economy calls for analysis at a number of levels. The advantages that a literate population offers to the growth of a market economy form a central theme in the discussion that follows. What might be the precise meaning of the 'growth of a market economy' in India is a major concern informing this discussion. At a different level, the discussion will cover the implications of becoming literate in terms of 'what is there to read'. In addition to this generalised question, the discussion will also look at the specific problems of survival and development that the illiterates and neo-literates face in the emerging political economy. In this discussion the categories arising out of Innis's works will be supplemented by some others, the sources of which are sufficiently familiar.

It is commonly recorded that the lack of literacy is characteristic of the most vulnerable sections of Indian society. 'Vulnerability\*' in such usage implies a limited capacity

to sustain and protect oneself. Translated into more direct expression, it would mean an economic condition arising out of poor access to means of production. Members of the so-called vulnerable sections of society do not have independent and reliable access to the means, such as land or tools, necessary to generate a livelihood. All they have is the capacity to labour. For the opportunity to exercise this capacity they depend on people who own the means of production. The ownership gives them a dominant position *vis-a-vis* those who only have 'ownership' of their capacity to perform physical labour and the immediate products of this capacity.

Dominance carries with it the right to demand services at a price fixed by the dominant. This structure of relationship was explained well by the classical economists but most starkly by Marx who added another dimension to it by pointing out the difference between the perspectives of the two parties involved in a relationship of dominance.<sup>19</sup> For the owner of the means of production, the relationship usually implies an exchange of money (which the owner has because of prior advantage) with a commodity and/or service which is bought with the purpose that it can be sold at a higher price than what was paid to buy it. This forms the money-commodity-money (MCM) cycle in which the owner of the means of production moves. The person who does not own the means of production works in a cycle that starts with the 'commodity' of labour or some other commodity which is the immediate fruit of labour. This commodity is exchanged with money so that some other commodity, necessary for survival, can be purchased. This is the commodity-money-commodity (CMC) cycle.

The CMC cycle represents, in its ordering, the relationship of the 'vulnerable' sections of society with the ones who are not vulnerable. The social geography of the illiterates coincides with the 'vulnerable'.<sup>20</sup> Within the illiterate groups or communities an earlier stage of the CMC cycle seems to continue to operate in the context of a number of daily needs. This earlier (in the evolutionary paradigm of Marx) stage is characterised by exchange of one commodity with another or a commodity-commodity (CC) cycle, based purely on 'use values' as opposed to the 'exchange values' underlying the MCM cycle. The CC and CMC cycles, it seems, continue to provide spaces in intra-community exchanges which involve recognition and practice of use values, while in relations involving exchanges 'outside' the community or group the MCM cycle finds expression.

The coexistence of CMC and MCM cycles in a society poses a serious problem of survival for those involved in the CMC

cycle. As Kurien points out, "deliberate cruelty is not required for the MCM exchange to disrupt a productive activity geared to the CMC pattern of exchange."<sup>21</sup> This is because the dynamic of the MCM cycle is far stronger and all-encompassing than that of the CMC cycle, in terms of the reach of its products and the possibility that potential users will be persuaded to buy these products in preference over others. Modern transport and communication are an integral part of the MCM cycle. The marketing power embedded in the MCM cycle can also be assumed to be sufficient to lure the consumers of goods produced under the CMC cycle to now use goods produced by the MCM cycle. A competition now becomes inevitable in which goods produced under the MCM cycle have a distinct advantage. Shift of the consumer away from its products acts as a major crisis for the CMC cycle. This crisis can be viewed as a foregone outcome of the penetration by the MCM cycle into a population sustained by a CMC cycle.

It has been mentioned above that in a population sustained mainly by the CMC cycle, use values continue to be recognised and practised in a number of contexts while exchange values take over in others. Contexts concerned with the subtler products of social interaction, such as knowledge and skills, are especially conducive to the continuation of use values in a population living by the CMC or CC cycle but penetrated by the MCM cycle. The spill of a generalised kind of language of exchange, such as money, does not decimate the reign of use and custom as long as the population remains capable of maintaining a distinction between its relations with the world outside and the relations within it. (This framing ability in the context of value-practice may depend on factors like geographical togetherness and self-concept or identity—factors which are themselves directly influenced by forces of the MCM cycle.) It is in the nature of use values to operate within a limited spatial coverage. This is because use values require specific codes of communication and recognition. They are culture-bound to the point of being community-specific, even person-specific at times. They provide the community with a sense of continuity or time-bonding as opposed to the capacity to control space. On the contrary, exchange values are enacted by means of the generalised currency of money which renders values culture-free and capable of being practised without the limiting influence of geography.

As a generalised skill, literacy has a far more meaningful and potent role to play in a culture steeped in exchange values than in one living mainly by use values. Oral exchanges, with their greater ability to maintain immediacies and active collectivities,

are highly suitable to groups living by or permitting recognition of use values. The penetration of an ecology based on exchange values necessarily demands the spread of literacy in such groups irrespective of individual needs, motivation and opportunity. Mass literacy and the storage systems of information it encourages can be seen as aspects of the fixed capital of a culture centred in exchange values. Knowledge, which is the most refined product of social interaction, is commodified when exchange values spread to every aspect of culture. Sources of knowledge, such as books, magazines and newspapers openly appear in vigorous exchanges taking place in the gigantic MCM cycle, sharing all the features characteristic of the commodities revolving in this cycle, pushed by the moving force of money and its accumulation. Literacy opens up phenomenal possibilities for the blossoming of human resource as its monopolistic (compulsory) control spreads; but, as in the case of other monopoly fixed capital, the fixed capital of literacy too features the gnawing problem of unused capacity. The all-encompassing, humanistic promises of mass literacy prove an illusion. Its putative effects on the best of its practitioners are drowned in the roar of capital. The more modest practitioners of literacy, the millions who achieve functional literacy as it is called, are forced to devour the most commodified of all literate expressions—advertisements and pulp literature.<sup>22</sup>

Advertisements come to the functionally literate through two major media today, television and newspapers. In the case of television, it is popularly believed that it circumvents the need for literacy in its audience. This popular belief is based on a superficial view of television. The needs that advertisements on television create depend for their fulfilment on literacy as much as newspapers require literacy among their readers. As far as the advertiser is concerned, literacy is brand-distinguishing ability. Only monopoly business can be conducted in the absence of this ability in the audience. As soon as competition enters the scene—and this is when advertising becomes really important<sup>23</sup>—literacy becomes relevant. The crucial difference between television and newspapers is that the former mainly uses entertainment to sell advertisements while the latter uses news for the same purpose. It is in this context that newspapers are more literacy-dependent and therefore provide better justification for mass literacy. This must be why literacy programmes customarily mention the ability to read newspapers as the desirable end-product of learning to become literate. The rhetoric of this argument equates news with awareness. This general equation makes it unnecessary to reveal how precisely the

ability to read newspapers will benefit the illiterate.

It does seem diabolical to suggest in a world as we see constructed in India today, particularly in the context of India's development, that news cannot be equated with awareness. One must see such an equation as being based on a naive perception as it ignores the processes involved in the assembly, designing and dissemination of news in the modern world. As part of the global media business, these processes are characterised by the same features of capital accumulation and the pursuit of the capacity to gain control over space and resources that are characteristic of any other global, multinational business. Indeed, it is impossible and futile to make an attempt to analyse the concept of news without taking into account the context of the news industry as it has developed over the last one hundred years or so.<sup>24</sup> News and entertainment are both important participants in the marked relations that the MCM cycle reifies. And they are not just participants; they also accelerate the MCM cycle by promoting its cultural and political correlates.

The attempt to locate literacy in the context of different but coexisting cycles of production defined along Marx's reflections was made here with the purpose of achieving a precise understanding of the so-called victims of illiteracy. We should now spare a moment to reflect on the nature of the naming which identifies vast numbers, of people, with complex histories and skills, in terms of a collective disability. The right to name in this manner is part of the hegemony that the literate have. The right extends to constructing a demonology of illiteracy witnessed in events where effigies of illiteracy are publicly burnt under the auspices of state-sponsored literacy drives. The demonology allows the literate to endow themselves with all legitimate qualities such as a scientific temper, a secular outlook, and the illiterate with all negative characteristics such as obscurantism, communalism, and so on. Clearly, the right to name is a monopoly of the literate. It is based, apart from other things of a material nature, on their access to modern knowledge systems and institutionalised education.

However, to identify the naming party as the literate is to commit a serious mistake, that of aggregating a varied population ranging from those who can barely cope with their material and cultural conditions despite their literacy, to those with the power to shape their own and others' conditions. At another level, the range includes literacy in the Indian languages at one end of the spectrum, and literacy in English on the other end. English is associated with the symbolic legacy of power as well as with the materially and culturally dominant parts of

the world today. Literacy, howsoever advanced, in an Indian language cannot bring the same reach and grip that English brings in relation to present-day global markets of both commodities and knowledge or skill. Disaggregation of the literate in terms of what they are literate in is necessary if one wishes to take cognisance of the mystification practised when literacy is glorified as an empowering skill by itself. Apparently, there are many literacies,<sup>25</sup> and it is not literacy as such but literacy in a particular language, and in certain crucial functions of that language, that makes a positive difference to the power one is able to wield with its help.

Disaggregation of the illiterate is equally necessary. We are used to seeing national profiles of illiteracy drawn by disaggregating the illiterates according to age, sex, caste or occupation. These profiles permit only certain, rather well known aspects of the relationships between illiteracy and economic ill-being to be appreciated. The geography of illiteracy is only vaguely revealed by such profiles, mainly in terms of inter-state, and in some cases inter-regional, differences. There is a need to look deeper at the geography of illiteracy, at levels below the state and regional levels and in terms of the relationship between mass illiteracy and production processes. In the state of Madhya Pradesh, which is counted among the least literate states in the country, mass illiteracy resides in its severest form in the 'inner' recesses of the state. Typically, these inner recesses are staple or raw-material producing parts of districts, supplying them to the developed commercial or industrial centres of the district or outside. Inter-district variation in illiteracy figures conceals this phenomenon. The kind of micro-geography of illiteracy I am proposing here would corroborate the metropolis-hinterland or core-periphery models that are part of the dependency theory of development. In the current market-friendly climate of our country, dependency theory is derisively cited as a theory of the 60s and the 70s, as if theories are not supposed to last more than 20 years (true, the market philosophy does favour planned obsolescence!).<sup>26</sup> Such derisiveness can only testify to the metropolisation of social inquiry which is consistent with the larger trends of the market-development model.

Problems of the inner regions or the hinterland have only worsened over the years, even as markets have grown and consolidated. Research on regional inequalities points in this direction<sup>27</sup> even though such research has been made without a broad theoretical framework other than what is available within the modernisation theory. The relationship between developed centres and the staple-producing hinterlands has deep relevance to the study of illiteracy. If

illiteracy implies an incapacity to fend against threats to survival and progress, it is highly meaningful that illiteracy should have its tightest hold in spaces which have been rendered extractable by the advancement of modern communications, but which are unable to develop in the sense in which development implies choice and 'doing' capacities of people—a term Macpherson uses to distinguish the developmental from the extractive concept of power.<sup>28</sup>

Why the inner spaces or hinterlands should interest today's market forces is not difficult to grasp. From a long, historical overview, these spaces have acted as shelters for the use values which impede the expansion of market relations. Natural resources as well as labour resources of these spaces remain relatively difficult to exploit on any large scale. Competition among entrepreneurs willing to venture into these spaces remains sluggish, even unfair from the point of view of parties that happen to come late. Parties interested in selling their products also find the low-key consumerism of the population and its monopolistic control by earlier arrivals an annoying problem. From the perspective of the market, people residing in such spaces remain committed to products and opportunities that are not capable of providing maximised satisfaction. For an MCM cycle to be set in motion in such areas would require first, means of rapid communication, and secondly, market awareness or socialisation into market-culture. Having begun during the colonial period, the first task received substantial attention after independence by way of enhancement of roadways, widening of narrower railways, and introduction of airways, while investments were lacking in manufacturing activity and in primary areas of welfare such as health and children's education. (Marx's somewhat naive hope that building of transport facilities under colonial auspices would help in the development of an industrial base in India stands belied in India's vast hinterlands.)

The story of modernisation of communications and means of trade has recently entered into a new stage with the arrival of direct dialling facilities for national and international telephone calls from every district in the country. It cannot be just coincidence that the task of modernisation of telecommunications was accomplished at the speed at which it was, just in time for the formal announcement of liberalisation and globalisation policies of the 90s. The investment in Indian telecommunications increased markedly from mid-80s onwards,<sup>29</sup> making accessible district after district to the metropolitan cities and the rest of the world, setting the stage for the 'opening' of the economy. Clearly, the 'open' economy was sentient enough to ensure that the means by which it could efficiently function were

ready before it received political and legal sanctions to go ahead. By providing the means of instant transfer of capital to the points of hectic resource-exploitation activity and management of goods without change in location, the modernised telecommunications industry has greatly augmented the capacities that modern transport facilities had created for exploitation of resources of the hinterlands. We can also see that availability of modern communications, in the absence of or prior to the development of modern manufacturing in large spatial blocks of the country, has promoted commercial as opposed to industrial growth. This trend continues to lend strength, as Sau points out, to the tendency towards dependence on and unequal exchange with the advanced economies of the world.<sup>30</sup>

The second step towards galvanising the MCM cycle in the 'backward' spaces is the creation of market-awareness. This task, already well under way under the auspices of the mass media, is now being completed with the help of a strident push towards achievement of mass ('total') literacy.<sup>31</sup> In an ethos created by the unleashing of cable television and now multi-channel satellite television, the function of tenuous literacy among the poor and oppressed masses can be in no doubt. The district collector of Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu has interpreted and implemented this function with greater candour than others by carrying out a survey of brand-awareness among neo-literates to ascertain the success of the literacy programme in his district.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, the collector is responding to the stark reality of a situation in which there is little to read other than names of competing consumer products. A valiant effort is indeed being made to produce special literature for neo-literates, but such literature (which is inevitably didactic, but that is another story into which we cannot go here) is not a part of the real world of book-publishing which continues to be afflicted by the ever-rising prices of paper (while newsprint is subsidised), a stiff rise in postal tariff for book transport, and gross neglect of the public library system. It is very difficult to imagine that an ethos constructed for the specific purpose of legitimising the liberalisation and globalisation programmes can actually permit mass literacy to be used as an instrument of announcing people's reading of the world as opposed to the hoardings designed to be swallowed by the people.

In the context of changing state-market relations, it is a moot question whether the state is acting on behalf of the market in financing and pursuing the current literacy drive. If this is so, it need not be seen as an unusual turn in the story of state-market relations in India. The turn is consistent with the theory of state-market relations under

the regime of property, as Heilbroner explains more clearly than others:

...the state foists upon the public the costs of those activities that would result in monetary 'losses' if they were carried out by the economic sphere, while recognising as inviolable the right of private enterprise to benefit from its profitable undertakings. This socialisation of losses applies to much of the network of canals, railways, highways, and airways that have played an indispensable part in capitalist growth, as well as the provision of literate and socialised work forces through public education programmes, the protection of public health, and the like. All these are examples of 'public works' behind whose manifest usefulness for the citizenry at large lies the latent economic function of providing necessary inputs for the operations of the M-C-M circuit, and the political function of strengthening the regime of the dominant class.<sup>33</sup>

Economic and cultural trends indicate that the market economy now consolidating in our country may have more to do with dominant classes in far-off countries than with our own who may be acting as representatives and partners of the so-called multinational interests. The 'representative' role of the local partners in such enterprise is necessarily accompanied by indifference to long-term meanings and psychological protection against self-criticism-venality, in short. The literacy that the state is busily spreading under these kinds of exigent circumstances cannot be what its customary, humanistic meaning suggests: the ability to read and decide. The perspective I have followed in this paper suggests that the dominant message of mass literacy in our times may merely contain the invitation to the masses to comply and participate in their own continued undoing.

'Undoing' is admittedly a strong, perhaps dramatic word to use in the context of present-day developments. How the new economic policy, particularly the wholesale devotion to the market as an ideology, will effect India's future and the condition of the oppressed masses may be a matter of debate. Its debate-worthiness, however, does not cover the main issue raised in this paper, namely, the differential capacities of regions and classes of people to participate in the emerging market economy. Those who propose a bright prospect for the structurally adjusted, opened up economy do not attend to the question whether all regions of the country and all sections of society will do well, or some will do well at the expense of others. Indeed, the tendency to aggregate economic futures, under the banner of the nation's economic future, seems to be apart of the logic of capitalism. In this matter, theories of economic growth have remained rooted in the early liberal political theories which proposed that the pursuit of self-interest is the best means of achieving col-

lective social good.<sup>34</sup> Accumulation of surplus, which lies at the heart of the concept of economic growth under the regime of capital, requires an aggregation of natural and human resources. Movement of resources, migration of labour, and employment of labour at the lowest possible rates are essential to economic growth. No wonder the history of colonialism and imperialism is so central to the history of the industrial revolution under capitalism. If we divest the concept of colonialism of its association with foreign rule, we would notice that the concept is still of use in the study of the relationship between classes and regions. This is a pertinent point to make in the Indian context where a variety of exchange processes co-exist and relationships between regions is commonly characterised by unequal exchange. In our kind of economic order, national-level aggregation of production or income serves to push the economic experience of the so-called backward regions and vulnerable sections of the population out of view. The cost at which these regions and sections are able to plug into the national economy is similarly overlooked.<sup>35</sup> Occasionally, one such region or grouping of people erupts into the nation-state's awareness by asserting its economic and cultural demands. Political and state processes then slowly activate themselves to deal with the recalcitrant voice, and sometimes succeed in turning it into a politically legible and legitimate language, but the economic order marches on, untouched.

Mass literacy cannot offer even a minor panacea for resolving the contradictions arising out of this scenario; as an isolated strategy, it is likely to deepen some of the contradictions. *If literacy is to become a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem, it will have to be conceptualised as one of the means to construct a post-liberal democratic scenario.*<sup>36</sup> Looking in that direction, we can profitably ask the question: Can the oral be used and developed as a resource for creative social action? The question draws its importance from the strong oral repertoire that is featured in Indian lore and knowledge systems. True, oral traditions are dying which is why the loud but ironical appeal to document them is heard these days. The appeal is ironical because documentation is a literate device which cannot really save the oral from dying. The oral word can be resurrected and strengthened only when it is put to use. Such a thought obviously goes against the literate-oral opposition which is central to literacy-related policy planning today. Indeed, in the present ethos which is hegemonised by literate communication, the idea may be seen as a conspiracy to promote the vested interests who want to keep India illiterate, a blot on the world, etc.<sup>37</sup> In an inquiry into literate-oral relations in ancient India,

Thapar<sup>38</sup> shows that "in many areas of Indian experience from the early past, the literate did not shut out the oral. In fact it often drew from oral sources". The oral continues to pervade our social life, its political, legal and economic institutions. It often lurks under the glossy, hard surface of literate practices, shaping decisions in unrecognised, illegitimate, and often erratic ways. Its formal growth, as a system of storage and refinement of knowledge and skills, stopped long ago, but its memory remains as does the memory of use values.<sup>39</sup>

Recognition of the oral will permit the development of balancing forces in a system dominated, and in certain sectors monopolised, by literate communication. Freire's emphasis on dialogue' was an attempt to resurrect the oral as a resource for social action, but it was hopelessly, though expectedly, misinterpreted by the literate world. In his last, little-read book, Dewey recognised the potential of the oral word in the context of his analysis of a public which is unable to act as a community.<sup>40</sup> He felt that the technologies of interaction had failed to make their expected contribution to democratic institutions and culture. Dewey saw democracy not merely as a system of governance, but as a way of life. He argued that the printed word had an important role in strengthening democracy, but this role was incomplete without local dialogue. 'Systematic and continuous inquiry into all the conditions which affect association and their dissemination in print is a pre-condition of the creation of a true public. But it and its results are but tools after all. Their final actuality is accomplished in face-to-face relationships by means of direct give and take... Ideas which are not communicated, shared and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought'. Dewey's point is that the space and the capacity for oral association are necessary to bring the logic of inquiry, which is central to democratic life, to fulfilment.

Acknowledgement of the validity of oral skills will constitute a major shift in present policy disposition. Most significantly, it will imply abandonment of the common perception of illiteracy as a stigma or threat. Oral skills are no different from the advanced skills associated with literacy in that they rise and mature in use. However, to put oral skills to use in a conscious manner requires serious adjustments in the concepts of time and technology that arise out of our infatuation with the written and printed word. The 'great divide' theory, proposing a crucial difference between the cognitive potentials of the literate as opposed to oral communication, will have to be dropped. Telling evidence regarding the incorrectness of this popular theory first became available some

time back, in Scribner and Cole's work on the Vai;<sup>41</sup> yet, the theory has persisted, riding on the perennial currents of 'common sense' and a certain kind of research. The moot point arising out of Scribner and Cole's study was that "the development of cognitive skills demands more than the imparting of a particular technology, even if that technology is literacy; it depends crucially on how a particular technology is used and (the web of practices and functions in which the technology is enmeshed."<sup>42</sup> If it is the nature of literate practices, rather than the presence or absence of literacy, which determines the consequences, both personal and social, of literacy, then we ought to pay more attention than we have been willing to pay to the uses to which literacy is being put in our times. The potential of mass literacy will be shaped by these uses, and by the social and economic overheads involved in these uses, rather than by some mystical power inherent in literacy.

#### Notes

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- 1 Brian V Street (*Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) calls it the 'autonomous' view of literacy which he distinguishes from the 'ideological' view. For a recent attempt to classify different perspectives on literacy, see J S Bell, 'Finding the Commonplaces of Literacy', *Curriculum Inquiry* (23:2, 1993), pp 131-54.
- 2 J K Galbraith *We Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p 1.
- 3 Donald Creighton, *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957).
- 4 Innis's major book-length works are: *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930); *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1940); *Political Economy in the Modern State* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946); *Changing Concept of Time* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952); *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951); and *Empire and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). In addition to these, there exists *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). Among important commentaries on Innis are Robin Neill's eminent work, *A New Theory of Value: The Canadian Economics of H A Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) and the papers included in *Culture, Communication and Dependency: The Tradition of H A Innis*, edited by W H Melody, L Salter and P Heyer (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1981).
- 5 McLuhan identified the potential of Innis's ideas early in his career. In a letter to Innis

(dated March 14, 1951; University of Toronto Archives, file B72-0003/005/018) he says that Innis's *Empire and Communication* (op cit) "suggests the possibility of organising an entire school of studies". It goes to McLuhan's credit that he accomplished just that. His acceptance as the chief inheritor of the Innis tradition is best testified to by the fronto-cover inscription in the latest edition of Innis's *The Bias of Communication* (1991): "The classic Canadian work on communication by the man who inspired Marshall McLuhan." One reason why McLuhan is so widely accepted as an exponent of Innis's theories may be that Innis's own writings are so difficult to read. Though an institution-builder and organiser of considerable stamina, as a teacher Innis is said to have been an inaudible mumbler (personal conversation with Charity Grant). His inarticulate style obviously helped McLuhan to make a reputation for himself, considering that McLuhan wrote in a loud, compulsive style.

- 6 See James Carey, 'The Origin of the Radical Discourse on Cultural Studies in the United States', *Journal of Communication* (33:3, 1983), pp 311-13.
- 7 For a comparative look at Innis and Marx, see Ian Parser, 'Innis, Marx, and the Economics of Communication' in Melody, Salter and Heyer (eds), *Culture, Communication and Dependency*, op cit, pp 127-43.
- 8 Innis's own review of Veblen is part of his *Essays in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956). For an analysis of Veblen's social and economic thought, see A K Davis, 'Thorstein Veblen Reconsidered', *Science and Society* (21:1, 1957), pp 52-85.
- 9 In 'The Concept of Monopoly and Civilisation', unpublished address delivered on July 6, 1951 (University of Toronto Archives, file B-72/0003/012/47).
- 10 For a comparative study of Innis and McLuhan, see James W Carey, 'Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan', *The Antioch Review* (27:1 1967), pp 5-39.
- 11 Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, op cit, p 5.
- 12 *Innis on Russia* (Toronto: The Harold Innis Foundation, 1981), p 75.
- 13 Innis, *Tiie Bias of Communication*, op cit, especially see the chapters 'A Plea for Time' and 'The Problem of Space'.
- 14 E A Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963) and *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: OISE Press^ 1976); Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982). Havelock's influential thesis that alphabet literacy allowed liberation from the limitations of oral thought has been criticised by J Halverson ('Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53:1, 1992, pp 148-63) for simplistic and superficial treatment of Greek literature and philosophy. Havelock's own view of Innis (*A Memoir*, Toronto: The Harold Innis Foundation, 1982) was that Innis's fondness for the oral was part of his nostalgia for the world of his childhood. Havelock, like many other critics, shows no acquaintance with or interest in, Innis's economics.
- 15 Neill, *A New Theory of Value*, op cit, p 100.
- 16 Innis, 'The Penetrative Powers of the Price

- System' in *Political Economy in the Modern State*, opcit, p 166.
- 17 Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, op cit, p 189.
  - 18 Innis, 'The Military Implications of the American Constitution' in *Changing Concept of Time*, op cit, p 45.
  - 19 Karl Marx, *The Capital*, Vol I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), especially chapters on 'Commodities' and 'Division of Labour and Manufacture'. For an overview of Marx's theory of value, see *Marx in His Own Words*, edited by E Fischer and F Marek (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).
  - 20 This is an attempt to apply Marx's distinction between use values and exchange values in the context of societies like ours where literates and those lacking literacy coexist and relate to each other in a variety of work settings. It is hypothesised here that in the exercise of these relations literates and illiterates act as communities. Of course, it is likely that such communities will be supported and nourished by several other variables, not just by literacy or its lack.
  - 21 C T Kurien, *Growth and Justice* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1992), p 270. For anyone interested in how the market philosophy works in a setting such as India, Kurien's analysis in the sub-section 'Marketisation in Third World Countries' (pp 270-79) is indispensable.
  - 22 An important but isolated work on what the masses actually read when they acquire literacy is Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958).
  - 23 For a discussion of advertising as a means of recruitment to the regime of capital, see Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982).
  - 24 See Innis's paper, 'The Press, a Neglected Factor in the Economic History of the 20th Century' in *Changing Concept of Time*, op cit. For recent developments, see Ben H Bagdikian, 'The Lords of the Global Village', *The Nation*, June 12, 1989, pp 805-30.
  - 25 For an interesting classification of different kinds of literacies, see D A Wagner, 'Literacy and Culture: Emic and Etic Perspectives' in *Literate Systems and Individual Lives*, edited by E M Jennings and A C Purves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp 11-19.
  - 26 See, for instance, Gail Omvedt's 'Fears over Seed Patents Are Exaggerated' in *Down to Earth*, July 31, 1993, pp 45-46.
  - 27 See R H Dholakia, *Regional Disparities and Economic Growth in India* (Bombay: Himalaya, 1985) and K R G Nair, 'New Economic Policy and Development of Backward Regions—A Note on Orissa', *Economic and Political Weekly* (28: 19), pp 939-42.
  - 28 C B Macpherson, *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973). Also see the distinction made by Robert S Anderson and Walter Huber (*Die Hour of the Fox*; New Delhi: Vistaar, 1988) between two meanings of 'development', namely, self-determination and interference.
  - 29 T H Chowdary, 'Reforming the Telecom Regime', *Seminar* (404, April 1993), pp 27-33.
  - 30 Ranjit Sau, *India's Economic Development: Aspects of Class Relations* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1981). Also see Sau's piece, 'The Development of Monopoly Capital in India' in B Berberoglu (ed), *Class, State and Development in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992), pp 157-84.
  - 31 ID *The New Industrial State* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), J K Galbraith says that the management of demand requires approachability of people in all situations. "None should be barred by illiteracy or unwillingness to read", Galbraith says laconically, p207.
  - 32 'Economic Gains of Literacy', *The Hindustan Times*, Jun 11, 1993, and 'A Literal Pay-Off', *Business India*, April 26-May 9, 1993, p 118.
  - 33 Robert Heilbroner, *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism* (New York: WW Norton, 1985), p 102.
  - 34 For a critical analysis of this doctrine, see C B Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
  - 35 When a 'backward' region starts to participate in the modern economy, the redistribution of benefits of this participation in the world division of labour takes place in a manner that favours the core or advanced regions. Such advantage of the core region is an inbuilt feature of the continuous mobility of capital, goods and labour, according to I Wallerstein and W G Martin ('Peripheralisation of Southern Africa, II: Changes in Household Structure and Labour Force Formation', *Review*, 4:2, 1979; pp 192-207). For a fuller view of this important perspective, see T K Hopkins and I Wallerstein (eds), *World Systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982).
  - 36 C B Macpherson, *Democratic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), especially Chapter 9, 'Post-Liberal Democracy?', and Sue Golding, *Gramscie's Democratic Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) could serve as good starting points for such reflection.
  - 37 This need not be seen as an insinuating remark, considering how commonly articles and books are merely flipped through and constructed according to previous impression rather than read with some effort. A striking example of a scholarly reading, which completely misses the point of a full-length book and misconstruits it is Aparna Basu's review, 'Education: The Colonial Legacy', *Economic and Political Weekly* (27:36, 1992), pp 1910-11.
  - 38 Romila Thapar, 'The Oral and the Written in Early India', unpublished, Basu Memorial Lecture, Central Institute of Education, Delhi, 1988.
  - 39 Samir Amin feels that the memory of use values could create a positive response to the crisis in the culture of exchange values which is the culture of capitalism. "Today it is no longer a critique coming from romantics (and from Utopian socialists or reactionaries), rather it is a true alternative political struggle, a rejection of the 1984 perspective, a way out of the system toward the creation of a new social formation" (interview with Amin in Gunder Frank, *Reflections on the World Economic Crisis*, London: Hutchinson, 1981).
  - 40 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), p 218.
  - 41 Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981).
  - 42 PM Greenfield's review of Scribner and Cole, *ibid*, in *Harvard Education Review* (53:2; 1983), p 219.